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ABSTRACT

Various issues related to the undergraduate education of adults are addressed. Adult learners comprise an increasingly greater proportion of the college student population, and these older students differ from traditional college students in significant ways, including their stages of development in life, value systems, outside responsibilities, and learning characteristics. The perspectives related to characteristics and special needs of adult learners that should require college faculty, administrators, and student services personnel to re-evaluate how they relate to the increasingly greater number of non-traditional students on campus are discussed. The focus of this paper is on demographic trends in the adult population, stages of adult development, values shared by adult learners, and characteristics and special needs of adult learners. It has been observed that adults who return to college tend to be in transition and experiencing crises in their lives (e.g. divorce, unemployment, or geographic relocation). They tend to be sacrificing more than younger students to attend college and to be highly motivated yet lacking in confidence to succeed. Their developmental stages, values, study skills, and life experiences differ sufficiently from those of younger students that colleges should rethink their philosophies of teaching and foci of student services to meet the divergent needs that adult students have. Contains 24 references. (SM)

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Non-Traditional Students:

Adults in Transition

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Non-Traditional Students: Adults in Transition

Abstract

Adult learners comprise an increasingly greater proportion of the college student population. These older students differ from traditional college students in significant ways, including their stages of development in life, their value systems, their outside responsibilities, and their learning characteristics. The purpose of this paper is to address various issues related to the undergraduate education of adults. In particular, this paper ties together perspectives related to characteristics and special needs of adult learners that should require college faculty, administrators and student services personnel to re-evaluate how they relate to the increasingly greater numbers of non-traditional students on campus.

NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS: ADULTS IN TRANSITION

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades population growth has been accompanied by increasingly greater proportions of adults. From 1946 to 1964, birth rates increased dramatically throughout the United States. Although birth rates fell after that, there is now a wave of adults passing through the population. At the crest of the wave is the baby boom generation, comprised of persons now in their 30's and early 40's. Increasingly greater numbers of these--and older --adults are attending college, either for the first time or as returnees (Hodgkinson, 1983).

Today, we may define the adult learner as "one whose learning activities are secondary to other social or economic roles" (Loewenthal et al, 1980). Adult learners attend college or university classes for a variety of motivations including career advancement, personal and social goals, and intellectual curiosity (Rogers, 1951, p. 144). For many, it is a necessity, especially in an age of technical obsolescence and sociological flux. In response to the historical mind-set that formal education is only for the young, Lengrand says, "The notion that a man can accomplish his life-span with a given set of intellectual and technical luggage is fast disappearing" (Gleazer, 1980, p. 67). For many, college education in the adult years is also what

Cropley (1977) calls a "second creaming" (p. 20) since studies show that it is usually those adult students who already have the most education who seek more. Cropley also points out that lifelong learning is needed for many people to fill in the gap created by the erosion of family values and family living, especially in the domains of moral, affective, and social education (p. 25).

This paper seeks to address various trends and issues related to the undergraduate education of adults. These include demographic trends in the adult population, the stages of development of adults, the influence of the values that adults bring with them to the classroom, and the characteristics and special needs of adult learners that distinguish them from traditional college students.

DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS IN THE ADULT POPULATION

Census data reveals the current "crest" in the population wave represented by persons in their 30's. In 1980, the median age of all Americans was 30.0. In July, 1986, the median age was 31.7 years. In 1980, 27.7% of the population were between the ages of 25 and 44. In 1986, 31.4% of the population were in that age range (U.S. Department of Commerce, September, 1987).

Statistics show that about 20-26% of adult students enroll on a part-time basis because they tend to rely on their own incomes to finance their educations rather than on financial aid (Solmon and Gordon, 1981, pp. 9-10). To a greater degree, adults attending undergraduate school are resuming college studies rather than enrolling in college for the first time. In the late 1960's, two-thirds of all adult students in college were first-time undergraduate students. By 1971, that fraction had fallen to one-half, and by the late 1970's, to only about one-quarter (p. 10). Solmon and Gordon support Cropley's observation that "All of the relevant literature on adults in post secondary education confirms that those with more education tend to seek more education" (pp. 10-11). Younger adults generally will be enrolled in degree programs; adults over 50 generally are not earning degrees.

Regarding gender characteristics, there tend to be more adult women than adult men in undergraduate programs. The women are generally older than the men because traditional roles for women have required them to remain out of school for longer periods. Regarding other characteristics, there are higher percentages of non-white students among adults than among traditional students. Full-time students tend to be unmarried or living apart from their spouses. Part-time students tend to be married and living with their families (Solmon and Gordon, pp. 13-24).

A May, 1984, government survey of 40,752,000 courses taken by adults during the previous 12-month period revealed that most adults took courses for job-related reasons. Of that group, 14.6% reported wanting to change occupations, 3.6% reported wanting new jobs within their current occupations, and 75.3% reported that they were simply seeking advancement in their current jobs. The single largest field of study was business, commanding 22% of the total adult courses taken. Business was closely followed by engineering with 14.5% and health care with 12.5%. Other subjects studied included education (7.1%); philosophy, religion and psychology (6.6%); language, linguistics and literature (5.3%); social science and social studies (5.1%); and natural science and mathematics (3.3%) (Digest of Educational Statistics, 1987).

Despite a 6.3% decline in the 18 to 24-year-old population, total college enrollment increased by 10% (from 11,387,000 to 12,524,000) between 1980 and 1985. Even though there are more 18 to 24-year-olds attending college, there are proportionately greater numbers of persons aged 25 and older attending college. The largest percentage increase in enrollment has been by women 25 and older (Stern, 1987).

STAGES OF ADULT DEVELOPMENT

Traditionally, people assume that the development and growth of the individual occurs only during childhood, leaving the adult years marked by relative stasis. The truth, however, is that adults continue to develop in well-defined stages just as children do. Havighurst (1955) says:

> Adulthood is not all smooth sailing across a well-charted sea with no adventures or mishaps. People do not launch themselves into adulthood with the momentum of their childhood and youth and simply coast along to old age...Adulthood...is a *developmental period* in almost as completely a sense as childhood and adolescence are development periods.

Knox (1977) defines *development* as "the orderly and sequential changes in characteristics and attitudes that adults experience over time" (p. 9). Levinson (1978) divides the years of adulthood into four stages of development: early adulthood, parenthood, post-parenthood, and retirement. Transitions between stages are hardly smooth, but are punctuated by stress and personal reassessment. Definite "passages" occur around age 30, as adults settle down into their roles as parents and workers; around ages 45-50, the so-called "mid-life" transition; and finally around ages 60-65, as adults prepare for late adulthood, retirement and death (pp. 18-22). Levinson aptly puts it that for adults there is "a time to marry, a time to raise children, and a time to retire" (p. 24).

Levinson also says that each transition marks a displacement from equilibrium: "Transitions challenge adults and require them to grow" (p. 28). The impact may be severe--biologically, psychologically, socially, and economically--especially when changes are compounded by geographic moves, divorce, illness, or loss of a loved one. The response to change varies widely. Some adults respond with action, while others with contemplation or withdrawal. For many, action means acquiring more education (pp. 21-28).

Knox (1977) believes that adult development includes periods of stability during which confidence and self-esteem are built. These periods are separated by interludes of tension as new challenges are tried. Knox writes, "Substantial evidence indicates that, at least through the first six decades of life, as people grow older they become increasingly different from each other" (p. 11). Much of the difference results from living in a pluralistic society. Because there are no predetermined life-styles anymore, adults seek self-knowledge through education to continue in their development.

Knox points out that change in the individual is confounded today by the accelerated changes occurring in society. "Because the past century has witnessed rapid social change..., characteristics of the older generation today do not provide an accurate estimate of what the characteristics of the younger generation will be when they get to be the same age" (p. 11). Thus, decisions become more difficult to make, and it becomes harder to distinguish change

from progress. In response, Knox observes that "when confronted with a welter of conflicting choices and no clear sense of direction, the safest course of action may be no action at all" (p. 47).

Education serves a key function of assisting the adult in transition by helping to provide the needed sense of direction. Knox argues that adults need to focus on a sense of the current self versus the ideal self. Positive change occurs when adults "place themselves in situations that encourage what they want to become" (p. 29). A college degree increases the number of "life chances" an adult has, i.e., the number of available opportunities from which to choose (p. 63). For the adult seeking challenge, growth, or direction in life, therefore, the return to college encourages an optimistic approach to life accompanied by a feeling of assertiveness and a sense of direction.

VALUES SHARED BY ADULT LEARNERS

Morris Massey (1979) has produced a seminal work on the subject of value programming and why the values of different generations of adults differ. It is ironic that today's traditional student tends to hold *non-traditional* values, while today's non-traditional student tends to hold *traditional* values. This section explores Massey's explanation for the dichotomy and the relevance of value formation to understanding the adult learner.

Massey explains that value formation occurs by programming, i.e., the impact of outside forces. Before the age of 10, parental programming and hero models are vital to value development. In fact, so much of our "gut-level value system" is fully developed by age 10 that an understanding of a child's environment at that age can explain his or her value system decades later. During the teenage years, socialization plays an important role in value development, but by around age 20, values are essentially "locked-in." After age 20, Massey says that only "significant emotional events" can alter the values that have been locked in, events "so mentally arresting that they force individuals to closely, critically examine their original values" (p. 8).

Groups of individuals become value programmed during the same general period of time through the same series of common experiences. When 10-year-olds lock in their basic gut-level values, they in effect say, "This is it. This is the way the world is and should be. These are the rights, the wrongs, the goods, the bads, the normals, the not normals" (p. 51). For millennia, successive generations were value programmed essentially the same, because change was slow or non-existent. In contrast, change today is the norm. Values of different generations--especially those who were 10 years old before 1950 (i.e. before television) and those who were 10 after 1950--differ drastically because "the programing experiences of young people

are fundamentally and qualitatively different from those of previous generations. They were programmed differently; therefore, they *are* different!" (pp. 52-53).

Not only were the after-1950 children value-programed differently from the before-1950 children, but with the 1970's came "Future Shock." An entirely new culture was imposed on the old one. Vietnam and Watergate were significant emotional events that shocked the nation and altered gut-level value systems. People lost faith in government and in institutions in general. Today's "latchkey" children receive their value programming from television rather than from the family (pp. 128-157).

What these changes mean in terms of the adult learner is that adult students bring with them to college different value systems than 18 to 20-year-old students bring. People around 50 years of age and older bring with them fairly traditional values. People in their 40's and late 30's are "in-betweeners," programmed from the late 1940's to the late 1950's. Members of this group hold many traditional orientations, but they also accept many of the new values that came in the 1950's. Massey calls younger generations the "challengers." As a group, they have been programmed to challenge most traditional institutions and values (p. 179).

Massey lists some of the values that are strongly held by traditionalists versus values strongly held by challengers:

Traditionalists	Challengers
Group-Team	Individualism
Authority	Participation
Institutional Leadership	Questioning
Formality/Structures	Informality/unconventionality
Puritanism	Sensuality
Social Order	Equality/Ability
Work for Work's Sake	Work for Self-Fulfillment
Problems	Causes
Stability	Change/Experiment
Materialism	Experiences (p. 181)

As colleges and universities deal with adult students, faculty and staff need to be understanding and supportive of the vast differences in values that different generations bring with them to the campus in order to effectively meet the needs of these older students. In particular, university personnel need to recognize that passages through the stages of adult development frequently are accompanied by Massey's significant emotional events. Among the reasons that bring adults to the campus may well be their responses to significant events that are linked to their stages of development and changes that are occurring to their gut-level value systems.

CHARACTERISTICS AND SPECIAL NEEDS OF ADULT LEARNERS

As indicated previously by demographic trends, adults comprise an increasingly greater proportion of college students. In Arizona, for example, when community college enrollment is included, four-fifths of the head-count are now non-traditional students. Only one in twenty community college graduates completes his B.A. degree within two years of completing his A.A. degree. In fact, the transfer rate in Arizona from universities to community colleges is now higher than the transfer rate from community colleges to universities. The higher rate is accounted for in part by including students who already have B.A. degrees and are enrolling in community colleges to receive vocational training (James).

Cohen and Brawer (1982) observe that adults "move in and out of educational experiences, 'achieving' educational objectives that are personally rewarding, but not always marked by a credential or diploma" (p. 254). "Stop-outs" are not "drop-outs." In contrast to adolescents who tend to take college for granted, adults place more value on going to college because they have waited longer to attend--and usually attend at greater personal and economic sacrifice. Because of the higher value placed on college education, the adult learner is more likely also than is his younger counterpart to find his college experience deeply satisfying.

Kidd (1973) remarks that adults too often are held back by myths about the ability of adults to learn new skills and knowledge. He rebukes the myths by saying that all evidence suggests *"that adults can learn effectively"* (p.34). Generally speaking, Kidd feels that adults excel academically better in the social sciences and the humanities than in mathematics and the natural sciences. He also feels that gender is not a factor in ability to succeed.

In the first part of this century, Thorndike performed the pioneer research on adult learning ability. Thorndike (1928) concluded that the curve of ability to learn increases to age 20, stays at a plateau until age 40, and then tapers off 13-15% in later years (p. 127). While the shape of the plateau is still the same, current researchers extend it into later years because today people live longer and healthier lives (c.f., Kidd, 1973). Thorndike also concluded that obstacles to adult learning tend to be more external than internal, including factors such as family and work responsibilities and the fact that employers typically do not value general learning for their employees. In addition, by age 25 many people historically had learned the greater part of what they wished to learn and probably would not have continued learning unless it gained them some kind of economic advantage. Today, however, increased leisure time and longer retirements provide encouragement for formal learning activities (pp. 127-129).

Thorndike enunciated several principles of learning which apply well to adult learners because adults tend to be intrinsically motivated to learn. These principles include the following: the Law of Effect, in which the learner retains what he finds satisfying or rewarding to know; the Law of Exercise, which describes the effect of repetition on retention of learning; and the Law of Recency, which states that the sooner information is used, the better it is retained. Adult learners generally may assimilate new information at a slower rate than do adolescents, but they tend to retain it much more readily than do younger learners (James).

Contributing to the success of adult learners is "the comparatively richer experience of the adult and what use is made of this in the learning transaction" (Kidd, 1973, p. 45). Adults also succeed because they are better able to internalize long-range goals and work patiently toward them over time. The experiences adults bring with them to the classroom have provided them with better judgment and reasoning ability and, generally speaking, greater competency in problem-solving skills (Kidd, pp. 48-61).

Aslanian and Frickell (1960, p. 12) describe three categories of reasons why adults initiate learning experiences. Adults tend to be: goal oriented, as they attempt to accomplish specific objectives; activity-oriented, as they seek to develop social contacts and relationships; and learning-oriented, as they

attend college to learn for the sheer pleasure of knowledge. Knox (1977, pp. 32-53) lists some of the attractive features of mixing older and younger learners together in the same classroom. Chief among these is that mixing generations provides inter-generational relations lacking in today's nuclear families. Also, positive interaction in the classroom tends to break down negative stereotypes each generation has about other generations. Aslanian and Frickell (p. 14) and Knox (p. 65) also list some of the barriers to adults attending college. These include family and job situations, geographic remoteness from the nearest campus, cost of attendance, and lack of financial aid for part-time students.

Adult learners have many needs which they share in common, both among themselves and with younger students. Pennington (1980) defines a need as a deficiency that detracts from a person's well-being. A need exists when it is perceived that a gap exists between actuality and what would be a satisfactory situation, or between current and what would be a desirable set of circumstances (p.2). Kidd (1973) quotes Malcolm Knowles as having said, "The deepest need an adult has is to be treated as an adult, to be treated as a self-directing person, to be treated with respect" (p. 36).

Adults pursue educational experiences because they have life goals and objectives which they wish to satisfy. College faculty and staff must

understand what adult learners seek to achieve if they hope to assist them to achieve their goals. Solmon and Gordon (1981) have surveyed university students of all ages about their educational objectives and have found that the objectives of non-traditional students are not very different from those of traditional students. Some of the objectives indicated most frequently include the following: to be an authority in one's field, to help others in difficulty, to develop a philosophy of life. Adults tend to feel, however, that it is too late to become successful in science, art, music, or literature (pp. 73-77). Ulmer (1980) observes that adult participants in a course "will not continue if they perceive that they are not making progress toward their goal" (p. 10). James puts it most succinctly: "Adults vote with their feet."

In the Information Age, adults find that they must know how to locate and use knowledge. Also, they find that they must focus more on inter- and intrapersonal development, not just on the development of cognitive skills. Cropley (1977) finds that adults achieve greater satisfaction with education if they experience vertical integration of educational experiences through life and horizontal integration of education with home, work and leisure activities (pp. 13-16). Cassara (1980) asserts that well-educated people have learned well to access their own needs and are adept at setting goals to achieve those needs.

Lowenthal (1980) observes that "a major theme in the literature of continuing education is that adults as learners are concerned with maintaining a positive self-concept." (pp. 34-35). Other authors support his observations. Rogers (1951) says that "Adult learners tend to be both highly motivated to learn *and* lacking confidence in their ability to do so" (p. 144). Knox (1980) emphasizes that adults tend to doubt their ability to succeed and require continuing encouragement. Adults bring a wealth of experience into the classroom, and will feel encouraged if they can channel that experience into academic success (p. 7). Chudwin and Durran (1981) stress that anxiety is a big problem for adults. Also, adults fear competition with younger students (pp. 108-119).

Because of situational barriers to attending college full-time, many adult students can benefit from receiving academic credit for relevant life experiences. Snider (1981) asks, "Should a middle-aged adult stop pursuance of full-time work, rearing of family in an accustomed life style, and management of home in order to attain a degree or certificate?" (p. 152). Snider argues the need for alternative evaluation for college credit.

In summary, adult learners represent a diverse population of individuals, rich in life experience, wishing to be treated and respected as adults, motivated to succeed, and insecure about their ability to do so.

College personnel need to be cognizant of their existence on campus and of their special needs that have to be satisfied to facilitate success in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, demographic trends in the adult student population have been discussed, along with the characteristics, needs and goals of adult students. It has been observed that adults who return to college tend to be adults in transition who may be experiencing crises in their lives due to events such as divorce, geographic relocation or unemployment. They tend to be sacrificing more than younger students are to attend college. They tend to be highly motivated, yet lacking in confidence to succeed. Their developmental stages, values, study skills, and life experiences differ sufficiently from those of younger students that colleges should rethink their philosophies of teaching and foci of student services to meet the divergent needs that adult students have. As the characteristics of the undergraduate population continue to change, academic programs and student services also should continue to change.

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